

## IRISH AND IRISHNESS IN G.B. SHAW'S

### “JOHN BULL’S OTHER ISLAND”

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#### ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw (26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950) is dramatic comic genius, sartorial brilliance and cynicallatic enthusiasm. He occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English Theatre for over sixty years and wrote more than 60 plays. Yet for all his undoubted talent and universal success his reputation as an Irish writer remained somewhat ambiguous in relation to the land of his birth. His Irishness or nationality has for the most part been considered secondary as a source of inspiration or influence to his art and ideology. Present article aims to investigate the Irish and Irishness in the Shawian play John Bull’s Other Island, focusing especially on the nationalism, national identity and Anglo-Irish relations, realism, stereotype, and characters.

**KEYWORDS:** Ambiguous in Relation, Irishness or Nationality, National Identity and Anglo-Irish Relations, Realism

#### INTRODUCTION

England, for Shaw, stimulated the condition of comic outsider, one central to his attempts to touch up Victorian society, divorced by his Irish birth and upbringing, from patriotic emotion. This fact is summed up when referring to Shaw as no longer nourished with experience or pity from Ireland but keeping the boldness and even the mockery of the national type. He still being as a part of it soil and he has been cut off from that soil.

In a rigorous interpretational sense, Shaw did not reflect Ireland’s spirit in his works, since his more universal world annulled the aims of organizations such as the Gaelic League. Indeed it might be said that his English dwelling at times pulled him into its English profundity beyond the peripheries of his Anglo-Irish identities. Philip L. Marcus, in assessing Irish writers’ contributions to the Celtic Revival, acknowledges that Shaw “wrote out of a conscious desire to contribute to the development of a national literature or indeed identified himself with the Revival.” It was, however, possible to argue that his work revealed what he called “an Irish sensibility” (83). Marcus undoubtedly identifies that sensibility as the main driving force of his dramas - satire. Shaw as nineteenth century exponent of a satirical tradition launched in the Restoration period by Congreve, and continued by Farquhar, Goldsmith, and Brinsley Sheridan. Shaw used conventional dramatic form for the highlighting of his radical ideas. That all of these writers were satirists was “no accident” since they were caught in a position between two cultures and thus were “less committed to and more objective about English values, or conventions.” (McHugh and Harmon, 143)

When Shaw did focus on Ireland, it was firmly in correspondence, reviews, essays, and expressions of opinion on its political dilemma. But though he was an outsider belonging fully to neither country nor its avowed traditions, the patriotic direction, in so much as there was one, was invariably towards Ireland. The paradox kept him squarely in that

nosy middle place viable to Irishman in England. But it also enabled him to effect a clinically separated assault on Anglo-Saxon convention that gave Shaw carte blanche to “view English life without preconceived notions and without those prejudices which always encircle a human being in his native environment” (Malone, 227).

To sate the artistic aspirations of Shaw, Ireland was too small and provincial. He realised that he needed international and global influences to inspire and challenge his imaginations. Through Ibsen, Shaw sought revolutionary drama. His higher aim, however, was to make an effect in almost every field, as an artist, philosopher, politician, economist, neo-religionist, and in language itself. His refusal to adopt traditional English spelling or even abide to established punctuation norms could be seen as a standing protest to England’s medium of communication, which he sought to overthrow and replace with his own, more practical version. And his spelling of England’s greatest dramatist and posthumous competitor for the playwright’s throne (without its concluding “e”) is further, if little recognised proof of the iconoclasm beyond patriotic consideration.

From Shakespeare to Shaw and Yeats; attempts to distinguish the Irish from the English were firmly shot through with wrong ideation. So, if London was the place, Ireland frequently was the subject

Actually differentiating English from Irish was better by Shaw than Yeats, as *John Bull’s Other Island* illustrates, in showing how the comic reflection controlled the expressions. Broadbent, the English contractor, is more passionate than the Irish, and on his first meeting falls in love with an Irish colleen beside the romantic Round Tower in Ross cullen. Doyle, his Irish colleague long domiciled in London, exhibits the rigidity associated with the English, and feels forced to expose illusions in Anglo-Irish relations wherever they appear. When Broadbent refers to “the melancholy of the Keltic race” Doyle comes close to blast: “Good God!!! ... When people talk about the Celtic race, I feel as if I could burn down London.”(Shaw, *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*, 83)

### **John Bull’s Other Island**

It is a surprise to one who considers the miraculous body of work that Shaw produced that *John Bull’s Other Island* is one of only two plays of his where he thematically returned to his homeland, the other being O’Flaherty V.C. *John Bull’s Other Island* is recognised as Shaw’s most important work on Ireland. *John Bull’s Other Island* is chronologically announced as Shaw’s *magnum opus*. This play registers the opening of a new era in Shaw’s career in the popular, as well as, the technical sense.

*John Bull’s Other Island* 1904 marks a turning-point in the career of Bernard Shaw. We find Shaw breaking squarely with tradition, in this epoch, and finding artistic freedom in non subordination. *John Bull’s Other Island* depicts the conflict of racial types and shows its author as a master of comic irony, and at heart a poet. It is a true drama of national character.

*John Bull’s Other Island* originally was commissioned by W.B. Yeats for the opening of Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, but Yeats rejected it as too long and too difficult to produce. This play was found inappropriate both to the resources of the new Abbey Theatre and to the temper of the neo-Gaelic movement. Shaw drew a bold and tenacious picture of the real Ireland of today; and the complement was the production of the play, not at the Abbey, but at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

As a rule, in Shaw’s former plays the place was not remarkably material, the ideas deftly bandied about at times and the characters often supra-natural. But *John Bull’s Other Island* is different the play itself is the fine example of

Shavian dramaturgy, the characters are set steadfastly more firmly upon the earth. This new play had marked a new stage in Shaw's career showed nothing short of a new type of drama. Emotion is ancillary to idea, character more important than action, and conflict of ideas replaces the conflict of wills of the dramatic formula.

As readily as many of Shaw's other plays *John Bull's Other Island* crossed boundaries. For the problem is essentially unique, despite the signal features of the character-drawing, and, as the title conveys the impression, peculiar to the British islands.

Shaw has adjusted the situation of the play with the hand of a master; readers observing the rigorous probity of the true dramatist. Moreover, the characters are sharply individualized; each is a personality as well as a type. This very fairness allows Shaw a free play of intellect that partisanship would have stifled; every situation is instilled with the Shavian ironic consciousness. Most critics as well as readers suppose *Man and Superman* as Shaw's most popular play and absolutely it is. But if it is most popular play, *John Bull's Other Island* regarded as Shaw's greatest dramatic work it is Shaw's magnum opus. "Yes, that is quite true," Mr. Shaw said; "my last plays, beginning with *John Bull*, are set more firmly upon the earth. They have ceased to be fantastic, and tend to grow more solid and more human." Mr. W. B. Yeats has the cleverest and truest remark about the play: "*John Bull's Other Island* is the first play of Bernard Shaw's that has a genuine geography." (Archibald, 378)

Ironically many tales of Ireland involve characters who feel a strong urge to leave their country in order to succeed. In *John Bull's Other Island*, Larry Doyle is a character who left his small town when he was very young so that he could live in England. After an English education, he is now a successful civil engineer. When he describes his wishes when he was young, he had only two ideas: first, to learn to do something; and then to get out of Ireland and have a chance of doing it.

In the previously mentioned *John Bull's Other Island*, Larry Doyle has already succeeded after he left his family behind and had gone to London. But yet that does not seem to be good enough. He appears to preserve his patriotism to a degree, arguing for a time about the proper way to improve Ireland. His ideas seem revolutionary. He says that any feudal lord must be called into account for those that work on their land. This would close the small family run towns, but those that could get jobs would be much better off. This too, is still not enough. He does what will be bad for Ireland and lets his English friend, Broadbent; to contest for parliament for the sake that being Irish makes a poor Irishman. At the end, although he has the opportunity to win back the old love of his life, he lets her go. With the later transcendentalism of its author, actually, *John Bull's Other Island* represents realism. It, in one sense, is a satire on the classical Englishman, who is never passionate as when he sees silliness and sentiment in the Irishman. Broadbent, whose mind is all murk and his ethics all gush, is steadfastly convinced that he is bringing reason and order among the Irish, whereas in truth they are all smiling at his delusions with the critical separation of so many devils.

Certain cliques outcasted Shaw from the beginning within the Irish literary revival who were too narrow-minded to even consider accommodating views that had even the slightest suggestion of incompatible and difference to their own agenda. Shaw was specified that his opinion would be expressed regardless of the opposition that stood in his way. Shaw attained good outcome in annoying many provincial Irish nationalists of the "neo- Gaelic" movement, the Lord Chamberlain and the British colonial administration in the space of four years, as a matter of the perpetrating and subsequent rejection of *John Bull's Other Island* in 1904-5 and the dialectical production of *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, against the wishes of Dublin Castle in 1909.

By deconstructing the stereotypical stage Irishman, Shaw realised that he could eventually reveal the hollow charade of this ultimately racist caricatured stage convention. Shaw included all the political implications of the Stage Irish conventions in *John Bull's Other Island*: the laborious passionate Englishman, the returned aspirant expatriate, the exploited farmer, the priest and the Irish colleen. He sets them all in motion and then invites us to examine them with the ordinary man's calm and honest eye. In a review of an 1896 revival of Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) Shaw announced, "I am quite ready to help the saving work of reducing the sham Ireland of romance to a heap of unsightly ruins" (Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties* II 33), and in 1916 he once again reiterated this fact "Ireland is in full reaction against both servility and the stage Irishman" (Shaw, *The Matter With Ireland*, 99). Shaw used the same method in *Arms and the Man* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*; he... "designed to make the conventional uses of the materials artistically unacceptable to men of intellectual conscience." (Meisel, 141)

As a matter of fact, *John Bull's Other Island* is an analytical study of the Irish migration facing the concept of national identity and Anglo-Irish relations. The play is concerned with realizing and revealing styles of national performance, both the colonizer and colonized, have built Irish and English and perfected over the centuries alike in a manic attempt to disarm the other for further pecuniary advantage - it is all a question of serviceableness. Patsy Farrell assumes the character of the stupid, superstitious Irish peasant, which as Shaw exposes in his stage direction "is not his real character, but a cunning developed by a constant dread of a hostile dominance, which he habitually tries to disarm by pretending to be a much greater fool than he really is. Englishmen think him half-witted, which is exactly what he wants them to think" (Shaw, *The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw*, 436), and similarly the empirically minded Broadbent portrays to completeness the character of the good-natured, well-intentioned, liberal Imperialist - and so the performance continues, each pandering to the other's preconceptions of superiority. But just as at the beginning of the play when Larry Doyle disparages and undermines the conventional stereotype of the stage Irishman by revealing the Glaswegian Tim Haffigan as a fraud...

*Man alive, don't you know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more-power-to-your-elbow business is got up in England to fool you, like the Albert Hall concerts of Irish music? No Irishman ever talks like that in Ireland, or ever did, or ever will. But when a thoroughly worthless Irishman comes to England, and finds the whole place full of romantic duffers like you, who will let him loaf and drink and sponge and brag as long as he flatters your sense of moral superiority by playing the fool and degrading himself and his country, he soon learns the antics that take you in. (410)*

With his exposure of a peasantry particularity (for English mirth), unintentionally, Shaw depicted that the play intended to remove the Irish stereotype. Yeats reminded Shaw that people of Ireland not interested in or concerned about differences of Irish and English character. And in so far as Shaw was an Irish writer writing about the country yet left, he could fall into the category of co-operators who were given to acquiescence in the imperialism's economy and with damaging of psychic effects on Ireland's already dissipated culture.

Doyle is trapped between his real national familiarity for his country, as representative of Shavian exile, and a rejector of old Irish dreams, and his revulsion of it as a failed economic entity. It is the torment of an Irishman imagination, against English practicality and self-serving Imperial competence. Keegan, the clerical, representative of the fanciful- dreamer, imagines a perfected future for independent Ireland, to replace the reality actual situation which is under a hungry, naked, ignorant and oppressed land with a utopian. Ironically, this is also Doyle's most secret vision, for "a

country to live in where the facts were not brutal and the dreams not unreal" (415). But it is Keegan who, may be in a reflection of Doyle's sin, sees through this Broadbentian scheme as one which will drive Haffigan very worthily to America, and deliver Roscullen into the possession of his syndicate for developmental exploitation. Shaw was acutely aware of the exploitative side of colonialism, as indicated by the following discussion between Broadbent and Haffigan:

*You know the English plan, Mr Haffigan, don't you" Broadbent inquires. "Bedad Sir, I do. Take all you can outofIreland and spend it in England: that's it". Broadbent's chagrined response had something of a hollow ring to it: "My plan sir will be to take a little money out of England and spend it in Ireland". (407)*

Similarly, Doyle by the end of the play has lost both Nora, and the chance to represent Roscullen in Westminster to Broadbent. He is as guilty of collusion in Broadbent's Machiavellian intrigues yet like Keegan he accepts Broadbent as Roscullen's most viable option for future economic development - resistance is ineffective, as the alternative does not even afford meditation:

*If we can't have men of honour own the land, let's have men of ability. If we can't have man of ability, let us at least have men with capital. Anybody's better than Matt (Haffigan), who has neither honour, nor ability, nor capital, nor anything but near- brute labor and greed in him. (430)*

Thus, *John Bull's Other Island* masterfully balances the Anglo-Irish condition from the perspective of a disappointed expatriate with its unemotional air and ironical powers. It is not an Irish or English play in as much as it is an Anglo-Irish one - an exact split of two cultures, brought together in a game of reciprocal practical expediency in unison, but traditionally opposed. Shaw created the competence of the invader, but he taps subconscious forces from the Irish psyche, which in the character of Keegan, and to a lesser extent in Doyle, transcend that efficiency, and might also represent the more repressed passionate nature of Shaw himself. Politics is the winner, but Shaw makes clear that the Irish intellect given to dreaming, as exemplified by Keegan, need play no second fiddle to anybody, least of all the quixotic Broadbent who, in tilting at Irish windmills, goes charging into battle with not the least notion of the ultimate consequence of his actions for the country he fools himself into thinking he is helping.

The complexity of Shaw's own position has been examined by Nicholas Grene as migrant writer in *John Bull's Other Island*: "Larry Doyle is the most subtle study of the emotions of the Irish exile before Joyce", Shaw equates the returning Doyle with "the dream of escape and the fear of return, the guilty shame and self-disgust of nationality." (Grene, 75)

Some Essays in Fabian Socialism which had been written by Shaw between 1888 and 1904, dealing with the 'Irish Question', one obtains a more definitive understanding of Shaw's 'Irishness' and what he was hoping to achieve with *John Bull's Other Island*. So, if *John Bull's Other Island* was Shaw's desire to ultimately re-educate his British audience, and an attempt to reveal the hollowness of ethnic stage stereotypes through the contrary of national character-types, then it was also a damning condemnation of the threat of myopic nationalism. The reviews, according to George Mills Harper, present description of nationalism's function in detail within his theory of Political Evolution and place the late Victorian fascination with the question of Irish within the perspective of Fabian Socialism. Rereading the play in the context of these topics was a typical Shavian process of "generating lively plays from topical debates. His intent of focusing the audience's attention on long-term issues, through comedy also becomes clearer". (Turner, 59)

Shaw summarizes the Shavian anti-nationalist stance in 'organic' analogous terms: "There is indeed no greater curse to a nation than a nationalist movement, which is only the agonizing symptom of a suppressed function" (Shaw, Prefaces, 455) this Shavian anti-nationalist stance best summed up by Larry Doyle in a conversation with his partner Broadbent in Act I of *John Bull's Other Island*:

*You keep clear of your father because he differs from you about Free Trade, and you don't want to quarrel with him. Well, think of me and my father! He's a Nationalist and a Separatist. I'm a metallurgical chemist turned civil engineer. Now whatever else metallurgical chemistry may be, it's not national. It's international. (Shaw, John Bull's Other Island, 84)*

Perhaps it was his inherent awareness and experience of the 'curse of nationalism' that let Shaw to be more objective considering the manner in which he defined his nationality, but Shaw remained an Irishman foremost all his life. Adopting this internationalist position, he appeals to the English Broadbent, as a fellow civil engineer, to consider that "The one real political conviction that our business has rubbed into us is that frontiers are hindrances and flags confounded nuisances." (Ibid)

Shaw believed that the Irish nationalism had to be extension to the more essential objectives of international socialism. The continuous injustices of Irish nationalists angered him, as he truly believed that the Irish farmer never had it so good compared to the suffering endured by the British.

## CONCLUSIONS

Irishness is a very embarrassing idea; it is the struggles and conflicts of the same people, as Larry Doyle character. The love of country, small town feelings, internal disorder and conflicts, are all quickly summed up in one simple adjective: Irishness.

John Bull's Other Island is an analytical study of the Irish migration facing the concept of national identity and Anglo-Irish relations. With its satirical powers and dispassionate air, dexterously balances the Anglo-Irish condition from the perspective of a disillusioned expatriate, it is an exact division of two cultures.

John Bull's Other Island exhibited a new type of drama, the problem is essentially unique, emotion is subsidiary to idea, action is less important than character, and conflict of ideas replaces the conflict of wills of the dramatic formula.

After reading the play, a picture is drawn by the word Irishness of what would be an Irishman like: a friendly man who feels that he cannot achieve anything if he does not leave his country which he loves and struggles with himself without ever knowing what he wants or how to achieve.

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